

A Conversation on the Literacy Development of Urban Poor Youth: Perspectives from the Classroom, Neighborhood and University

Ty-Ron Douglas, James F. Baumann, Adrian C. Clifton, Lenny Sánchez, Veda McClain, Pamela Ingram, and Ellis A. Ingram

“Urban education” means something different to everyone based on their gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality, culture, socioeconomic status, age, or profession. In every definition, it is a juxtaposition of positive intentions and negative outcomes. (Kress 2006: 324)

Abstract

In this article, we address various complexities associated with teaching and the literacy development of K-12 youth in urban poor school and community contexts. As such, we consider various conceptions of urban education through an honest conversation on the vexing issues and questions facing teachers, students, and families who work and live in urban poor communities. Drawing on a conversation circle of seven educators, the authors seek to move beyond the “positive intentions” of educators and move towards a (re) conceptualisation of what “positive outcomes” and success in schools and communities can look like.

KEY WORDS: *critical analysis, national development, false narratives, Vygotsky*

Introduction

Although there is no dearth of research and theory on urban education (e.g., Khalifa, Dunbar, and Douglas 2013; Kincheloe et al. 2006; Pink and Noblit 2007), nor certainly on urban literacy education (e.g., Compton-Lilly 2012, Kinlock 2011; Lee 2007; Li 2007; Morrell 2007; Neuman and Celano 2012; Wilkson et al. 2008), there is little consensus on what it entails, as Kress (2006) notes (see above). What seems clear is that discourses and the harsh realities related to urban education in the US disproportionately affect students of colour, to the extent that little has changed since Kantor and Brenzel (1992) made this disturbing observation:

After two and a half decades of federal, state and local efforts to improve urban education for low-income and minority children, achievement in inner-city schools continues to lag behind national norms and dropout rates in inner-city high schools (especially among African-American and Hispanic youth) remain distressingly high, while many of those who do graduate are often so poorly prepared they cannot compete successfully in the labor market. (p. 279)

In Bermuda, despite the reality that class-based borders and boundaries influence who occupies and has access to particular geographical and educational spaces (Douglas 2012a; Mincy et al. 2009), the language of urban space,

urban education, or urban literacy education is far less common than in other countries and regions. Instead, particular neighbourhoods, locales, and school names have become polite – yet still problematic – indicators or labels of inequity.

Notwithstanding the growing body of scholarly research on Bermudian education in general, gaps remain. Scholars have certainly captured important elements of Bermudian history, culture, and education (Bernhard 1999; Burchall 2007; Butler 1987; Caines and Caines 2014; Christopher 2009; Douglas, in press; Douglas 2012a, 2012b; Douglas and Peck 2013; Hodgson 1997, 2008; Hunter 1993; Jackson 1991; Matthews 2003; Musson 1979; Packwood 1975; Robinson 1979; Swan 2009; Zuill 1999), but not necessarily explored the dynamics of literacy development in the context of Bermuda's unique cultural, social, and geographical constructs. We recognise, though, that attention to relationships between the nature of knowledge, identity, and race have been considered and cannot be absent from research in schools (Douglas and Peck 2013; Matthews 2003). In truth, this article does not attempt to fill this gap, but our desire is to share and bridge an all-too-common conversation between educational stakeholders in Bermuda and the United States to spur on conversation about similar realities, challenges, and opportunities. As educators and scholars, one of whom attributes his academic and professional success to the sound educational experiences he had in Bermuda's public schools and Bermuda College, we recognise that we can no longer talk in silos about issues that are just as common in Columbia, Missouri as they are in Compton, California, and Cottage Hill, Hamilton Parish. Furthermore, continuing the rich legacy of Bermudian scholars who contribute to national and international conversations, this article reveals how the voice of a Bermudian academician can be embedded in and enhance international discourses.

In this article, we address various complexities associated with teaching and supporting the literacy development of K-12 youth in urban poor school and community contexts. In so doing, it is our intent to address diverse conceptions of urban education, but more importantly, it is our hope that through an honest conversation about the vexing issues and questions facing teachers, students, and families who work and live in urban poor communities, our "positive intentions" and those of other literacy scholars can be (re)directed toward "positive outcomes" and success in schools and communities such as in Bermuda and the US.

The structure

We seven coauthors are educators and community organisers with diverse backgrounds and experiences. We are collectively interested in enhancing the literacy development, life aspirations, and achievement opportunities for children and adolescents in urban poor school and community contexts. In this article, we draw on the concept of a Conversation Circle (CC) to raise questions and issues that intersect with our various contexts concerning urban literacy education. In a CC, participants convene in a circle, acknowledge one another as equals, invite inquiry, respect questions or confusion, suspend assumptions and certainty, are mindful of judgments, listen more than talk, accept the messiness of discourse, speak the truth from their experiences, and think together to create new knowledge (Roche 2013). Roche argues that CCs are much akin to an "elder's council, leadership circle, campfire circle, [or] roundtable" and that they are "embedded in our memes and maybe even our genes." In CCs "the question is more important than the 'answer'" (Roche 2013: 1).

Drawing on this structure, we first center the voice of Ty-Ron Douglas by sharing a vignette that describes his selected personal experiences and concerns about literacy development. Next we include excerpts from an "open" CC dialogue that occurred with a public audience during a professional conference. We conclude with an appraisal of what we uncovered and is yet-to-be understood about promoting the literacy development of youth in urban poor settings through "the power of thinking together" (Roche 2013).

A personal sharing

If the term “urban” were more common in Bermuda, it could be used to describe the neighbourhoods in which I, Ty-Ron Douglas, was reared. Growing up, my parents helped ensure I knew literacy mattered. To promote my literacy development, they purchased many books, National Geographic magazines, and a word of the day calendar. I read few of the books, occasionally scanned pictures in the magazines, and learned one word from the calendar, “facetious.” Undoubtedly, my parents’ influence was important but insufficient in my literacy development. In truth, school and community-based educators helped buttress my development in this regard. I remember the day my affinity for words was sealed: it was the afternoon I unleashed “facetious,” in context, on my unsuspecting Primary 3 teacher (Ms Rochelle Furbert) as she sought to reprimand me for talking too much. Rather than punish me, Ms Furbert inquired if I knew how to spell and define the word. I certainly did, gladly taking the opportunity to display my vocabulary skills in front of my classmates. She then affirmed me for my mastery of a word above my grade level, which buoyed my confidence and left a distinct impression upon my literacy development.

Other community-based pedagogical educators impacted my journey and literacy development (Douglas 2014; Douglas and Peck 2013). One such educator was my barber, Ricky Spence. For over 30 years, Ricky’s Barbershop has served as a hub – a classroom – for working class Black males for fellowship, sharing and learning. Ricky promotes literacy by purchasing the daily newspaper for his patrons to read and discuss. He has facilitated the literacy and educational development of thousands of Black males by moderating robust, culturally relevant barbershop dialogue that is often instigated by the print and digital media materials he makes available. Certainly, my career and commitment to literacy development and leadership have been shaped by educators like Ricky and Ms Furbert. We would do well to recognise and maximise the pedagogues and pedagogy of leaders in spaces inside and outside the traditional schoolhouse (Douglas 2014; Douglas and Peck 2013).

The conversation

Building on this vignette in what follows, we highlight three themes we believe are important for augmenting our understandings of literacy development for educators of urban youth across various locales: overcoming barriers to learning, transformative engagement and moving towards action. These themes emerged from a cross-narrative analysis of the topical impulses that developed from a face-to-face dialogue with the other educators at the 63rd Literary Research Association Conference who joined us in question-posing, experience-sharing and problem-solving centered on the topic of literacy in the urban context. Some of their voices are recognised in the following sections by the name “Conversation Member.”

Overcoming barriers to learning

A question from Ms Ingram: How do we negotiate cultural and environmental barriers to learning – such as family dysfunction, community violence, fatherlessness, poverty, abuse, incarceration – that some children bring into the classroom to enable them to actually “hear” and learn?

Dr McClain: We must do so gingerly and respectfully. Our urban poor cut across racial and cultural lines, and what has become more apparent over the past few years is that many families do not know how to stop the generational dysfunctions that prohibit and inhibit learning for their children. Parents at my school have begun to seek assistance from the school so they can learn what they need to do as parents to promote academic success. We share strategies and activities they can use at home with their children as well ways to interact more positively with teachers.

Ms Clifton: It is necessary to address the issues Pamela notes both inside and outside schools? I also challenge pre-service and in-service teachers to volunteer in their students’ communities. They must be a light in the darkness

and a part of the village that raises a child.

Conversation Member: As Ms Ingram suggests, we must establish permanence with our children and families so they can rely on us. They wonder: “Are you going to be there tomorrow? When I turn 12? At Christmas?”

Dr Ingram: I have found this to be so very true with our outreach programmes. When a person volunteers or provides service outside the classroom, the families are watching very closely to find out how long you will be there. It probably took us a few years to gain that confidence from our students and their families.

Dr Douglas: I think we must carefully analyse how we see young people. We must beware of deficit-based approaches that position students, their neighbourhoods, and their culture as half-empty. Certainly, family dysfunction, community violence, fatherlessness, poverty, abuse, and incarceration are real. Still, using an anti-deficit lens, I wonder how we can (re)frame these challenges as pedagogical infrastructure so the process of “hearing” and learning can be more reciprocal between the children, teachers, and leaders.

Dr Sanchez: Teachers certainly play a tremendous part in this process. A good friend of mine serves as the principal of an alternative high school. At this school, teacher meetings consist of check-points where they can share struggles and successes, as well as opportunities to enter into conversations about what it means to be a compassionate, respectful, truthful, and responsible teacher. She provides them multiple opportunities through course design and co-teaching, for example, where they can nurture personal passions so these interests seep into the energy of students’ learning.

Dr Baumann: Our discussion makes me think of the large-scale studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s on what was called “teacher effectiveness.” That research demonstrated that successful teaching and learning occurred in classrooms in which teachers had high expectations; believed in students’ abilities; and had a confident, optimistic “can-do” attitude. I believe that David Berliner used the word *convivial* to describe these environments. The research also demonstrated that effective teachers had a sense of humour, provided praise and communicated to children a sincere sense of caring – these were happy classrooms where students felt secure and valued.

Ms Clifton: Yes, we must be there with encouragement, a smile, and a hug – understanding that outside the school walls is where the real war is taking place.

Transformative engagement

A question from Dr Sanchez: How can literacy be used to affirm and reflect students’ lives? When do literacy practices and pedagogies promote or prevent children and youth from transformatively engaging with their world?

Dr Sanchez: We know that literacy is tied to social and economic opportunity and that it should not be taken lightly. Literacy is, after all, a regulation of access to particular subjects, forms, and ideas; and schools can either work to maintain or disrupt the advantage of these purposes. For literacy to affirm and reflect students’ lives, teaching and learning must value students’ experiences, desires, wonderings, and needs so that those become what is important in the classroom. This means we cannot let standards or prescribed curriculum take away the skills and knowledge students have.

Conversation Member: I have been a teacher in schools identified as “urban” or “serving diverse populations” and have invested in social justice and critical pedagogy. I believe in acknowledging, affirming, and building on students’ literacy practices and the texts they use and generate at school, in their homes, and around their communities.

Dr Sanchez: Jabari Mahiri (2004) uses the term “street scripts” to describe the kinds of texts students produce, perform, and publish in their everyday interactions. Examples include video, rap, spoken word, art-making, and any type of written or spoken language fashioned to express or expose daily experiences. In Valerie Kinlock’s (2011) book, *Urban Literacies*, teacher educators, researchers, and scholars share similar ideas for how students can

use pop culture, digital media and other forms of multimodality to fine-tune literacy skills that also promote varied ways of researching their communities. What all of these concepts have in common is that literacy instruction becomes transformative for a student when teaching and learning are rooted in the students' sociocultural and historical understandings of themselves and their communities. The goal for the teacher is to work towards utilising instructional designs of agency that encourage students to be creative, innovative and responsive to their needs and those they learn about.

Moving towards action

A question from Ms Clifton: How do we move towards action when confronted with research that shows our urban children as failing and after conversations like these, where the issues are highlighted even more?

Dr McClain: One action is to engage and partner with parents in helping them to understand the varied literacies children need to be successful in schools and in pursuits after schooling.

Conversation Member: I think that action largely depends on hope. I recall a powerful presentation at AERA by Sean Ginwright, who suggested that present-day children of poverty lack hope. When we can help instill a sense of hope, many changes are possible.

Dr Ingram: This is so true. It is so important to help students think through their own challenges and set goals based upon expectations set by themselves and others. I sincerely believe there is a unique brilliance in each and every student: we need to help them see it.

Dr Douglas: I agree, but we don't need to just move towards action; instead, we need to engage in reflective, thoughtful action. It's a cyclical process, where reflective action is partnered with critical reflection and strategic collaboration with other stakeholders.

Dr Baumann: This discussion reminds me of the qualities of teacher researchers, who possess an insider, or emic, view of teaching and learning, and who mix theory and practice, or praxis. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argued that we must find a way to add a critical dimension in which teachers move "between their classrooms and school life as they struggle to make their daily work connect to larger movements for equity and social change" (p. 291).

Ms Clifton: For me, I move towards action by waking up each morning and taking personal responsibility to walk what I talk.

Afterword

What can we conclude from our CC and "the power of thinking together"? We recognise that each of us has different experiences, different perspectives, and different points of view on the literacy development of urban poor youth. That is neither surprising nor unfavourable, although at first blush this may not seem like "thinking together." Yet we do see commonality in our beliefs and convictions reflected in our conversation. Across the spectrum of our conversation, we see potential in our three cross-cutting themes (overcoming barriers to learning, transformative engagement, and moving towards action) and want to make clear they are undergirded by anti-deficit conceptualisations of literacy development for urban youth. We believe any solution to educational reform or dilemma must "sing the praises" of youth and honour their linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources. This means literacy teaching and learning must invoke the virtuosity of youth while taking into consideration any political and cultural ideologies connected to the students' schooling context that may be rooted in prejudice or stereotype. Said another way, there is a need to build on and create bridges between the background knowledge and skill-sets urban poor youth bring to the classroom and the new knowledge and skills educators seek to impart.

In regard to broadening how pre-service teachers see and experience urban space, we ask university education programmes to consider how they might broaden the scope of their curriculum to include dimensions of community attachment. This includes service opportunities, but also examining the social and political capital of a particular community. The goal of this type of work would be to understand what it takes to significantly alter the life chances of an individual from a low-resourced community. We know communities have the capacity to change the conditions impacting their members. Pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators alike must look within communities to examine how community citizenship, for example, is promoted and encouraged and determine ways to make the schooling curriculum responsive to a community's needs.

Lastly, to reiterate our CC, we recognise there is an ongoing need to (re)evaluate our motives, expectations, and methods towards the instigation of a socially just movement that will lead to more equitable opportunities and outcomes for urban poor youth. While student success in Bermuda or the United States is grounded in our willingness as educators to better understand the unique context of the geopolitical and educational urban terrain in our jurisdictions, we cannot lose site of the larger regional, national, and global discourses that unify us as pedagogues and leaders. Rather than working to write a single story of what it means to teach “urban poor youth” across (inter)national and (sub)urban borders, our students often have much in common, despite their diverse needs. Our responsibility is to not only engage in conversations with and about similarities and differences, but to then work to find culturally relevant solutions to our localised and global educational challenges that can necessitate change beyond the borders that most closely surround us.

References

- Bernhard, V. (1999) *Slaves and slaveholders in Bermuda: 1616-1782*. Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Burchall, L. (2007) *Fine as wine: From coloured boy to Bermudian man*. Chapel Hill NC: Professional Press.
- Butler, D. (1987) *Dr. E.F. Gordon: Hero of Bermuda's working class*. Bermuda: The Writer's Machine.
- Caines, W.M., and D.A. Caines (2014) *Double vision: A journey to success*. Capshaw AL: Spirit Reign Publishing
- Christopher, J.T. (2009) *A random walk through the forest: Reflections on the history of education in Bermuda from the middle of the 20th century*. Winnipeg: Hignell's Book Printing.
- Cochran-Smith, M. and S. Lytle (1999) The teacher research movement: A decade later. *Educational Researcher* 28(7): 15-25.
- Compton-Lilly, C. (2012) *Reading time: The literate lives of urban secondary students and their families*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Douglas, T.M.O. (in press) Exposure in and out of school: A Black Bermudian male's successful educational journey. Teachers College Record.
- Douglas, T.M.O. (2014) Conflicting Messages, Complex Leadership: A Critical Examination of the Influence of Sports Clubs and Neighborhoods in Leading Black Bermudian Males. *Planning and Changing* 45(3/4): 311-38.
- Douglas, T.M.O. (2012a) Border crossing brothas': A study of Black Bermudian masculinity, success, and the role of community-based pedagogical spaces. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro NC).
- Douglas, T.M.O. (2012b) Resisting idol worship at HBCUs: The malignity of materialism, Western masculinity, and spiritual malefaction. *The Urban Review* 44(3): 378-400.
- Douglas, T.M.O. and C.M. Peck (2013) Education by any means necessary: An historical exploration of community-based pedagogical spaces for peoples of African descent. *Educational Studies* 49(1): 67-91.

- Hodgson, E. N. (1997) *Second-class citizens, first-class men* (3rd ed.) Canada: The Writer's Machine.
- Hodgson, E.N. (2008) *The experience of racism in Bermuda and in its wider context*. Bermuda: Bermuda Press.
- Hunter, B.H. (1993) *The people of Bermuda: Beyond the crossroads*. Toronto: Gagne-Best.
- Jackson, W.V. (1991) *The Jackson clan: The story of a Bermudian family*. Bermuda: Bermuda Press.
- Kantor, H. and B. Brenzel (1992) Urban education and the "truly disadvantaged": The historical roots of the contemporary crisis, 1945-1990. *Teachers College Record* 94(2): 278-314.
- Khalifa, M., C. Dunbar and T.M.O. Douglas (2013) Derrick Bell, CRT and educational leadership 1995-present. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 16(4): 489-513.
- Kincheloe, J.L., K. Hayes, K. Rose and P.M. Anderson (eds) (2006) *Praeger handbook of urban education*. Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing.
- Kinlock V. (2011) *Urban literacies: Critical perspectives on language, learning, and community*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Kress, T. (2006) Purple leaves and charley horses: The dichotomous definition of urban education. In J.L. Kincheloe, K. Haynes, K. Rose and P.H. Anderson (eds) *The Praeger handbook of urban education* (Vol. 1) (pp. 324-9). Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing.
- Lee, C. (2007) *Culture, literacy, and learning: Taking bloom in the midst of the whirlwind*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Li, G. (2007) *Culturally contested literacies: America's "rainbow underclass" and urban schools*. New York: Routledge.
- Mahiri, J. (ed.) (2004) *What they don't learn in school: Literacy in the lives of urban youth*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Matthews, L.E. (2003) Babies overboard! The complexities of incorporating culturally relevant teaching into mathematics instruction. *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 53(1): 61-82.
- Mincy, R.B., M. Jethwani-Keyser and E. Haldane (2009) A study of employment, earnings, and educational gaps between young Black Bermudian males and their same-age peers. New Columbia University School of Social Work, Centre for Research on Fathers, Children and Family Well-Being.
- Morrell, E. (2007) *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Musson, N. (1979) *Mind the onion seed*. Bermuda: Island Press.
- Neuman, S.B. and D.C. Celano (2012) *Giving our children a fighting chance: Poverty, literacy, and the development of information capital*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Packwood, C.O. (1975) *Chained on the rock*. Bermuda: Island Press.
- Pink, W.T. and G.W. Noblit (eds) (2007) *International handbook of urban education*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Robinson, K.E. (1979) *Heritage*. New York: MacMillan Educational.
- Roche, M. (2013) The natural way humans think together. Retrieved on 01/15/14 from <http://conversationcircle.com>
- Swan, Q. (2009) *Black power in Bermuda: The struggle for decolonisation*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Wilkinson, L.C., L.M. Morrow and V. Chou (eds) (2008) *Improving literacy achievement in urban schools: Critical elements in teacher preparation*. Newark DE: International Reading Association.
- Zuill, W.S. (1999) *The story of Bermuda and her people* (2nd ed.). London: MacMillan.